

**CHAPTER 5: THE FLATHEAD ECONOMY**

*A successful economy would be when “logging has once again become a large industry and stable. County government has stepped out of developers’ way to develop private land. People make money off forest logging rather than fires. County property taxes have not increased. Schools are self supporting. Private business does as private owners want (i.e. smoking). Our county stands up to state and federal governments, not just lay down to them”*

*-Smith Valley Resident, 01/10/06*

*A successful economy would have “an average income higher than the national average, which should be considered a bare minimum goal, we must devise incentives to bring ‘clean’, non-intrusive industries and businesses to the county, in part to help replace disappearing logging and agricultural jobs; in part to give a reason for capable, intelligent young people to remain”*

*-Somers Resident, 11/30/05*

**Introduction**

Northwest Montana’s economy is characterized by diversity. Flathead County has been identified as having the most balanced employment compositions in the Rocky Mountain West,<sup>1</sup> with no one sector of the economy providing the most significant employment or wages. Region specific export products such as Flathead Cherries, the tourism draw of Glacier National Park and Flathead Lake, and the growing areas of healthcare, specialized services, construction, and retail trade have produced the diverse Flathead County economy of today.

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The county’s natural environment is one of its chief economic assets contributing significantly to the high quality of life. This quality of life is characterized by natural scenic beauty, clean air and water and access to outdoor and recreational opportunities. The county’s growing population fueled mainly by in migration is a sign of the area’s attractiveness and confirmation that the quality of life is a major economic asset.

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Rapid population growth, detailed in Chapter 3, has been the major driver in the county’s economic vitality. The population of older, working, financially established adults has rapidly increased as those in their early 40’s to late 50’s have chosen to relocate to Flathead County. With time and demographic changes, the economy has transitioned to reflect an increase in the number of incomes resulting in more business activity and job growth.

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<sup>1</sup> State of the Rockies; Report, Colorado College, 2004

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**Goal**

- G.20 A healthy and vibrant Flathead County economy that provides diversity and living-wage job opportunities and is comprised of sustainable economic activities and private sector investment.

**Policies**

- P.20.1 Provide adequate land area designated for commercial ~~and industrial~~ use to promote affordability. ~~creating and thus~~ entrepreneurialism and/or businesses relocation to Flathead County.

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- P.20.4 Promote education and work force development programs to better prepare current and future generations for high quality job opportunities and to provide employers with quality and dependable workers.

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- P.20.5 Utilize economic development authorities to attract relocation or startup of businesses that offer competitive wages ~~and~~ job opportunities for those with a range of educational backgrounds. ~~and minimal impacts on the character of Flathead County.~~

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- ~~P.20.7 Support the continuation of traditional and existing industries to maintain economic diversity.~~

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**Goal**

- G.21 Available, accessible, and adequate business infrastructure including facilities, utilities, ~~services~~ and transportation networks to facilitate new businesses and relocation of existing businesses to the County

**Policies**

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P.21.1 Identify infrastructure needs of the various business types and identify areas of the County which can best suit those needs.

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P.21.2 Promote business centers and industrial parks in areas served by sufficient infrastructure with consideration to proximity to population densities.

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P.21.3 Encourage the development of an airport industrial/business center to provide convenient access to Glacier International Airport and to foster ~~the~~ a growing economy.

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P.21.4 Consider the infrastructure needs of local businesses when prioritizing development of new county facilities. ~~development.~~

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### PART 1: Economic Composition (see Goals 20 and 21)

The Flathead Valley was historically a natural resource based economy. Logging, mining and commodities production have decreased over time and ~~a~~ diverse economy, particularly strong in a variety of retail trade and service industries, is emerging. The county economy has experienced significant restructuring over the past twenty years as employment, labor earnings, and sales have witnessed enormous increases in the services and retail trade sectors, far out ~~shadowing~~ sectors with slower or negative growth. The natural amenities contributing to the character of Flathead County has attracted many small businesses and technology companies that are becoming more prevalent in light of the new knowledge ~~based~~, globalized economy. The factor responsible for this economic change is population growth, bringing demand for goods and services available in the local economy.

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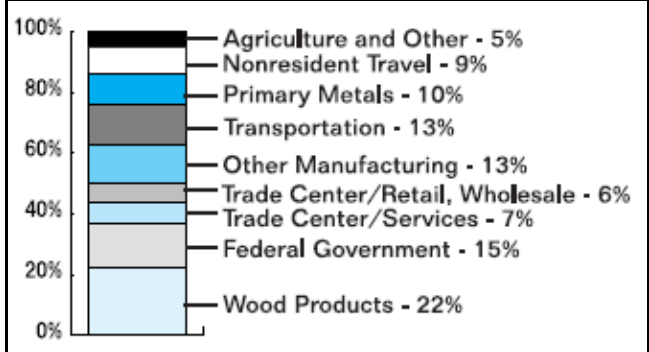
Several types of indicators may be used to evaluate trends in sectors and sub sectors of the economy. Wages and income, employment, and sales are some indicators which show changes over time. All of these indicators are discussed throughout this chapter to contrast past and current trends and to provide a snapshot of today's economy. The data detailing the Flathead County economy are extensive. However, consistent information for inter ~~sector~~ comparisons per year is not always available. Information contained in this chapter describes both basic and non ~~basic~~ sectors. Basic sectors are those sectors of the economy which are entirely dependent on export of their goods or services. Examples of basic sector goods are agriculture, manufacturing, and retail trade. Non basic sectors are dependent on local consumption of goods and services, and include services such as healthcare and education.

The county has grown in population over the past two decades. The growth in indicators such as wage income has vacillated between 1970 and 2000. For basic economic sectors, manufacturing of wood products, primary metals refining, and high tech account for approximately 45% of the economic base of the county. Another major element in the economy is the federal government which includes the USDA Forest Service and the

U.S. Park Service, transportation including railroads, and non-resident travel as shown in Figure 5.1.<sup>2</sup>

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**Figure 5.1**  
**Wage Income for Basic Economic Sectors – 2000 through 2003**



Source: Outlook for Flathead County, Montana’s 2005 Economic Outlook

The economic sectors detailed in the US Economic Census provide data for standard sectors in the county economy. (Construction is not included.) From the Census information, the total increase in sales for all sectors equaled 6% over the five year period, increasing from \$2.24 billion to \$2.40 billion during that period. Retail trades were the largest portion of sales in the county equaling over \$1 billion in 2002, while manufacturing sales totaled nearly \$646 million, and health care and social assistance equaled \$278 million<sup>3</sup>. A detailed discussion of individual economic sectors is available in Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

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Flathead County should take the appropriate measures to create a market friendly environment that promotes entrepreneurship and small business investment. Appropriate and compatible land uses, such as industrial parks near the airport and visible and accessible commercial lands, are a critical component of maintaining a diverse economy. With population projected to continue increasing to over 111,000 by 2025, the Flathead economy will continue to grow. A plan to promote all economic sectors through appropriate, diverse and compatible land uses that preserve the integrity of the community will ensure opportunity for diverse growth.

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**PART 2: Employment (see Goal 20)**

From 1990 to 2000, 15,700 new jobs were created in Flathead County representing an increase of nearly 50%. Dramatic increases occurred between 1980 and 2000 in areas of services and retail trade as shown in Figure 5.2.

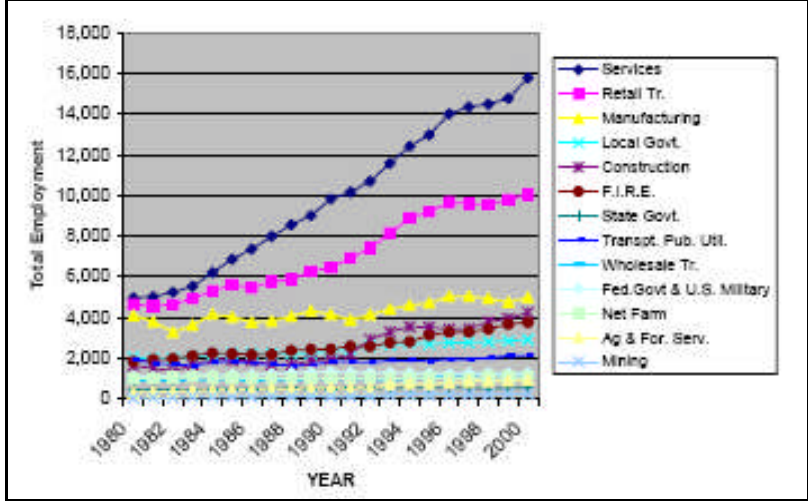
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<sup>2</sup> Outlook for Flathead County, Montana’s 2005 Economic Outlook

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Figure 5.2  
Employment by Sector – 1980 through 2000



Source: Swanson, Larry D. *The Flathead's Changing Economy: Assessing the Role of National Parks in the Economies of High Amenity, Non-metro Regions of the West*; National Parks Conservation Association, 2002

Approximately 35,707 persons were employed in private and public agencies in 2004. The concentration of employment is spread over several sectors as shown in Figure 5.3. The sector with the largest number of employees is retail trade with 5,551 employees, followed by government, accommodation and food services, and healthcare and social services. Those sectors with the least number of employees are company and enterprise management with 92, mining with 190, and utilities with 193.

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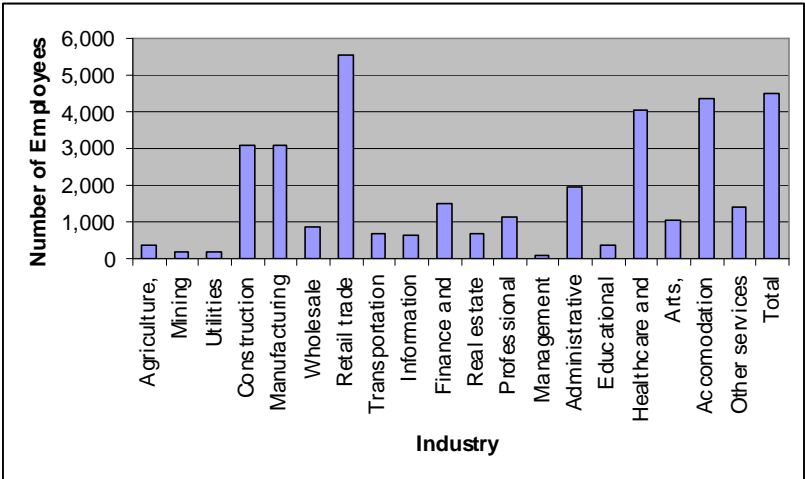
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Figure 5.3  
Employment by Industry - 2004



Source: Labor Market Information for Flathead County; Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 2005

Growth in the service and retail sectors, including retail trade and finance, insurance, and real estate, has notably increased to meet the growth in population. Service and retail trade sectors witnessed a 57% employment growth during the 1990s. The types of occupations that increased were mainly high quality jobs such as those in health care, engineering and management services, and business services. Service and retail occupations accounted for over 70% of the labor earnings during the 1990's. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of employees in health care and social assistance increased by 257%, followed by arts, entertainment, and recreation with an increase of 74% and employees in administrative and support and waste management and remediation services which increased by 70%.<sup>3</sup>

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Unemployment Rates

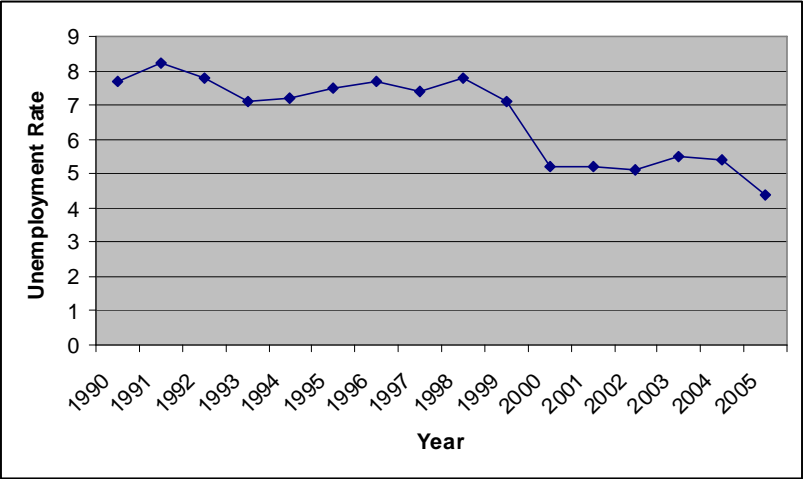
Flathead County is experiencing a low unemployment rate as seen in Figure 5.4. The Flathead County Job Service Workforce Center reports 600 job openings, compared with 400 in spring 2005. Businesses in the service and retail trade sectors are experiencing difficulty hiring and maintaining dependable employees.

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<sup>3</sup> US Economic Census 1997, 2002

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Figure 5.4  
Unemployment Rate – 1990 through 2005



Source: Unemployment Rates and Labor Force Statistics; [www.ourfactsyourfuture.org](http://www.ourfactsyourfuture.org)

Wages

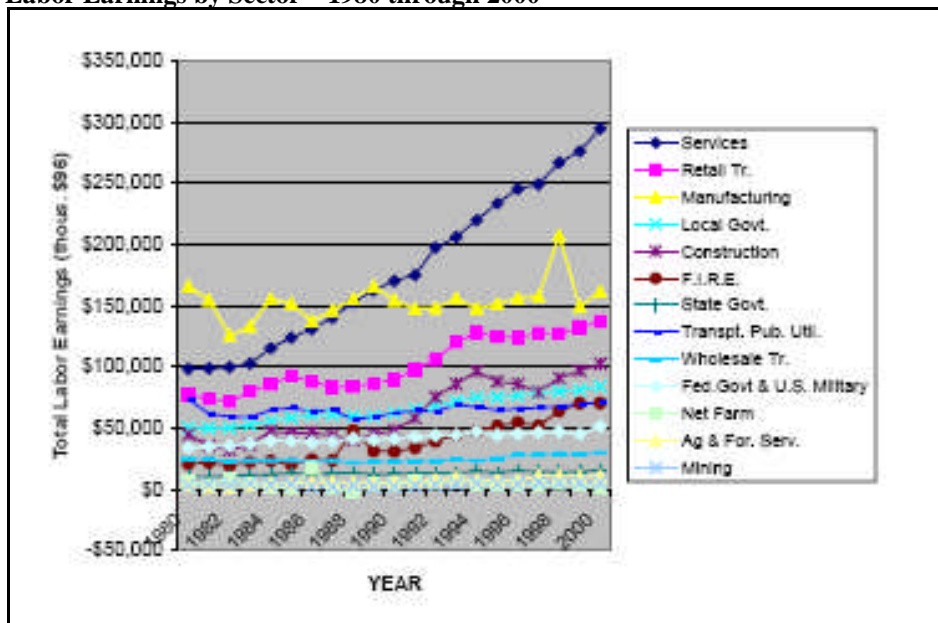
Flathead County wages are rising, *as shown in Figure 5.5*, however, they are far from meeting the national average. Flathead County employers pay less than US employers on average, but are more competitive with average wages for the state of Montana across numerous sectors<sup>4</sup>. Wages rose by 7.4% from 2003-2004. Per capita personal income in 2004 was \$28,598 placing Flathead County as 10<sup>th</sup> highest in the state.

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<sup>4</sup> Davis, Gregg, PhD and Lynette Smith. Flathead County Wage and Benefit Survey; Center for Business Information and Research, 2005

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**Figure 5.5**  
**Labor Earnings by Sector – 1980 through 2000**



Source: Swanson, Larry D. *The Flathead's Changing Economy: Assessing the Role of National Parks in the Economies of High Amenity, Non-metro Regions of the West*; National Parks Conservation Association, 2002

The increasing cost of living in Flathead County has influenced what is defined as a "livable wage," or a wage which covers the costs of basic needs such as housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and insurance. The cost of housing in the county, as discussed in Chapter 3, is a major factor in determining a 'livable' wage, since this cost has risen dramatically over the past decade. Approximately 51%<sup>4</sup> of private businesses offer medical benefits. This is probably because a majority of companies are small businesses, which have four or fewer employees, and offer medical plans only 47% of the time. In addition, only 20% of employers in the county provide pension plans, and 41% offer a 401(k) or savings plan<sup>4</sup>. This is an additional consideration when factoring wage and income for area residents.

Wages have generally increased since the latter part of the 1990s, when compared to the United States, the average earnings per job in Flathead County have steadily declined against the national average as shown in Figure 5.6. In the early 1970s, the earnings per job in the county were comparable to those nationwide. In 1973 the average earnings per job in the county was over 95% of the national average. By 2004, the average earnings per

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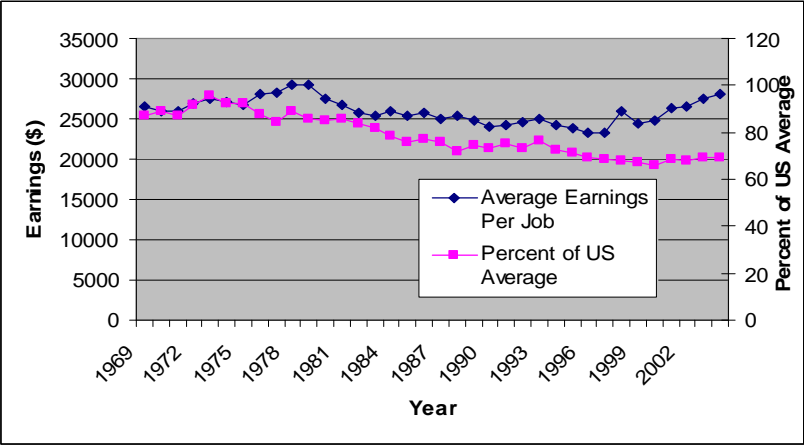
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job had dropped below 70% of the national average. Frustration with below average wages is evident from the residents of Flathead County. A goal commonly cited by participants in the 2005-2006 growth policy scoping meetings was jobs with adequate wages that include health insurance (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary).

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Figure 5.6  
Average Earnings per Job – 1969 through 2004



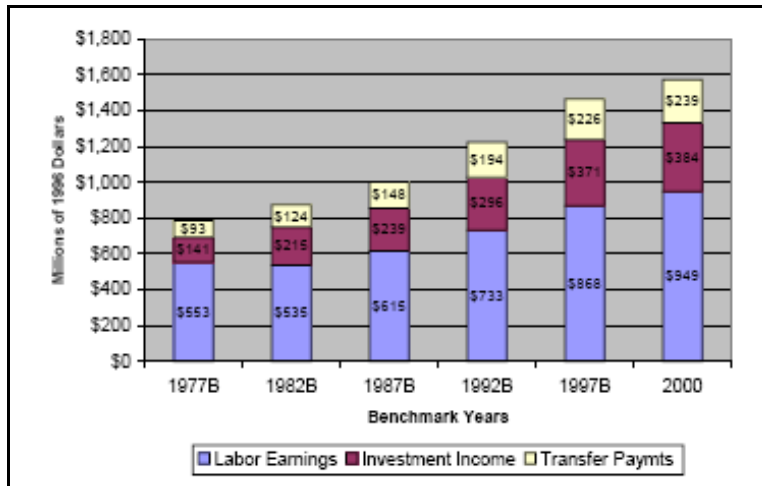
Source: Flathead County and Montana: Average Earnings per Job, 1969-2004; Northwest Income Indicator Project.

Flathead County residents increasingly live on non wage incomes which include income from investments and transfer payments, such as social security, as the number of people in the age group of 40 to 60 years has grown. In 2000, 60% of incomes were wage based, a 10% decrease from 1990. Nearly 25% of income in the county came from investments such as dividends, capital gains, and interest. The remaining 15% came from transfer payments sources such as social security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Figure 5.7 shows the income composition in the county from 1977 through 2000, comparing wage and non wage incomes.

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Figure 5.7  
Wage vs. Non-Wage Incomes – 1977 through 2000

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Source: Swanson, Larry D. *The Flathead's Changing Economy: Assessing the Role of National Parks in the Economies of High Amenity, Non-metro Regions of the West*; National Parks Conservation Association, 2002

## Workforce

The number of vacant positions indicates that employers are experiencing difficulty hiring and retaining dependable employees. The lack of sufficient workforce in Flathead County produces concerns about education, training and employee recruitment. ~~in~~ addition to the gender gap in employment.

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The majority of Flathead County residents 25 years or older have some education beyond high school, with 5% holding a ~~two~~-year associate degree, 18% holding a ~~four~~-year bachelor's degree, 6% with graduate or professional degrees, and 29% ~~with~~ some college but no degree. This education trend is similar to that ~~throughout~~ Montana. An educated workforce is critical to a diverse economy. A major component of attracting business investments to the county is having a well ~~trained~~ ~~ambitious~~ workforce. Flathead Valley Community College provides a critical service in achieving this objective and should be supported. For more on Flathead Valley Community College, see Chapter 7: Public Facilities and Services.

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In 2000, male workers comprised 54% of the workforce with female workers comprising the remaining 46%. Men held more jobs in labor intensive industries such as manufacturing and construction and retail trade while more women held positions in education, healthcare, ~~finance~~ and insurance<sup>5</sup>.

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## PART 3: Business Characteristics (see Goals 20 and 21)

<sup>5</sup> www.censusscope.org

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The majority of businesses in the county are small businesses indicating entrepreneurship is significant. Advanced telecommunication infrastructure and transportation has allowed new business opportunities in the county. The attraction of a high quality of living in the county is an advantage in bringing relocation or start up of high tech and value added businesses, as these businesses produce high value goods with low environmental impact. Non employee businesses, or small businesses that employ only the business owner, are prevalent and compose a significant part of the Flathead County economy.

Approximately 3,986 individual private businesses operated in the county in 2004, 91% of which are small businesses with one to 19 employees<sup>6</sup>. Construction firms are the most numerous with 743 construction businesses which include construction of buildings, heavy and civil engineering construction, and special trade contractors. Retail trade is the second most numerous in regard to number of establishments with 534 businesses including motor vehicle and parts dealers, furniture and home furnishing stores, gasoline stations, and general merchandise stores. Professional and technical services, accommodation and food services, and other services are the next most numerous sectors in regard to number of businesses as shown in Table 5.1. *Kalispell Regional Medical Center is the largest employer with roughly 1,600 employees.*

**Table 5.1**  
**Number of Establishments per Sector - 2004**

Industry	# of establishments
Construction	743
Retail trade	534
Professional and technical services	358
Accommodation and food services	324
Other services	317
Healthcare and social assistance	304
Administrative and waste services	207
Real estate and rental and leasing	205
Finance and Insurance	200
Manufacturing	186
Transportation and warehousing	130
Wholesale trade	121
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	115
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	101
Information	76
Educational services	29
Mining	18
Management of companies and enterprises	11
Utilities	9

<sup>6</sup> 2000 County Business Patterns for Flathead, MT; US Census 2000

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Total private businesses	3986
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Source: Labor Market Information for Flathead

Larger employers comprise a much smaller segment of the Flathead County economy. In 2000, twenty-four businesses employed between 100 and 499 employees, while only three businesses employed 500 or more employees<sup>6</sup>. Some of the top private employers in the county are shown in Table 5.2.

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**Table 5.2**  
**Top Private Employers in 2004**

Industry	Employer
Utilities	Century Tel, Flathead Electric
Services	Glacier Bank, Kalispell Regional Medical Center
Retail Trade	Wal-Mart, Smith's Food & Drug
Manufacturing	Semitool, Inc., <del>Columbia Falls Aluminum</del> , <del>Plum Creek Timber</del>
Construction	Rocky Mountain Contractors, Schellinger Construction

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Source: Labor Market Information for Flathead County; Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 2005

#### PART 4: Facilities and Infrastructure (see Goal 21)

Adequate business facilities and public infrastructure are necessary to promote a healthy business climate. Successful business communities often rely upon designated business districts to promote close proximity of businesses and services. Advances in transportation and communication technologies have enabled businesses to thrive in more remote areas of the nation. Important transportation infrastructure ~~to support~~ the county economy includes Glacier National Airport, road networks, and the railroad lines. Utilities such as those providing high speed internet and phone services are also essential. For an overview of land use considerations for commercial development, see Chapter 2, and for more information on public facilities and infrastructure in the county, refer to Chapter 7.

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#### PART 5: Economic Outlook

Estimates projecting future economic activity in Flathead County include an increase in non-farm labor income growing by 3.0 to 4.0 percent per year through 2008. Other projections had predicted slightly faster growth in 2005 with a deceleration in the following part of the decade. Both are shown in Figure 5.8. Predicting the future economic trends is a daunting task, particularly with the transitioning economy in Flathead County. As if population growth slows in the future, sectors dependent on the growth itself, such as the construction industry, will experience decline. The manufacturing sectors of the economy are currently declining. Growth in the service and retail trade is fast increasing, proving that the economy is clearly shifting to reflect the

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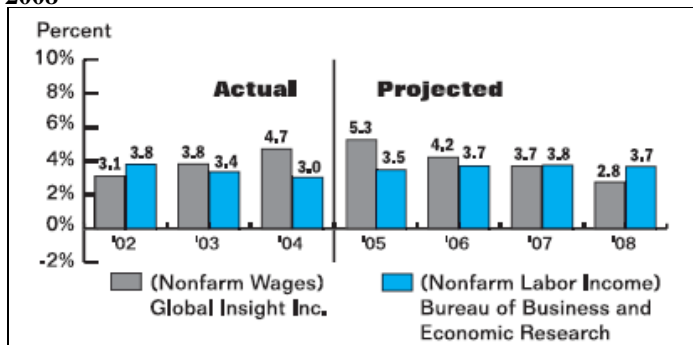
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demographic changes. Success in creating and maintaining a sustainable economy will rely largely on the behavior of private markets.

**Figure 5.8**  
Actual and Projected Change in Nonfarm Labor Income and Wages – 2002 through 2008



Source: Outlook for Flathead County, Montana's 2005 Economic Outlook

Projections for the state of Montana through 2012 appear to reflect similar trends in the county economy. These projected trends include employment declines in natural resource-based industries such as mining, crop and animal production, forestry, and industries such as computer and electronic product manufacturing, wood product manufacturing, and primary metal. Economic predictions for the state foresee increases in service occupations, construction, and retail trade.<sup>7</sup>

Wages likely will continue to rise as the cost of living in the county continues to increase. Employers will be forced to provide adequate wages to meet the cost of living, or be faced with a shortage of dependable employees. Any future influx and/or creation of new high value jobs would be expected to increase wages.

The economic outlook for the area is good, with a diversifying economy which protects the county from suffering from sudden economic changes in any one sector. Flathead County's ability to attract and retain a sustainable employment base, with industries and jobs that will remain in times of slow or fast population growth, will determine the strength of the economy in the future. Flathead County can assist by encouraging safe, healthy, convenient, compatible and efficient land uses that allow a diverse number of businesses to flourish during the process of community development.

*The goals and policies of this chapter call for a number of activities in support of business to be undertaken by the county. These include providing adequate land areas, fostering business and workforce development, supporting traditional industries, promotion of business centers and other efforts to support a growing economy. This can only be done in a satisfactory manner if the business community works with the county to produce an economic development strategy. Economic development organizations must*

<sup>7</sup> Industry Employment Projections, www.ourfactsyourfuture.org

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*clearly articulate the needs of existing businesses and employers. Efforts must be integrated so the county can send a unified message to prospective new businesses in a highly competitive climate. Land area needs must be demonstrated together with strategies for steering commercial growth to selected locations. Such a coordinated effort will help to assure that Flathead County's economic goals will be reached.*

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